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ABSTRACT

A stylistic approach to the teaching of English literature is required--one that focuses on the use of specific language styles instead of the traditional singular focus on theme. The only justification for studying English literature in its original language (i.e., English) is because the language used by the writer is a crucial element in the literary creation. Analysis of the use of linguistic repetitions (use of proper nouns instead of pronouns, the same verb tense, the same noun phrases) in English literature shows how certain themes and styles are created and carried throughout literary works. The teaching of English literature must focus on the linguistic style of the writing as well as on the theme. (CB)

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THE LANGUAGE OF LITERARY TEXTS

by John Greenwood

Paper presented at the Martina Franca Conference (Italy,1983).

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THE LANGUAGE OF LITERARY TEXTS

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First, I would like to justify my choice of topic, namely literature. A lot of work on Reading over the last, say, ten years has been concerned with non-fiction - EAP, EST, EOP, etc. We see this reflected in the proliferation of so many textbooks like the Nucleus series, the English in Focus series, the recetly published Read and Think series. All necessary and stimulating but the poor foreign language teacher of literature had been somewhat neglected. I think it is time we redressed the balance.

Literature is one form of English for special purposes, i.e. literature is the exploitation or the use of language, of words and their combinations - just as much as the English of Science or the English of Commerce.

Without wishing to deny the importance of other aspects of the study of literature (e.g. themes, imagery, psychological and sociological analyses, etc.), we must ensure that our learners realise that the writer (whether poet, novelist or dramatist) expresses him- or herself through language, and what distinguishes one writer from another is largely his particular use of language, rather than, for example, his choice of theme. An obvious example is Thomas Hardy, who, we all know, was concerned with the place of fate in our lives. Now that in itself is a fairly banal, mediocre theme. Most of us have from time to time felt depressed and fatalistic; and yet few of us are capable of linguistically expressing ourselves in a literary way so as to command respect as a novelist of Hardy's stature.

In short, when we read literature, we recognise the writer's style. So, like Prof. Widdowson in his book "Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature"[I], I am pleading for a stylistic approach to the teaching of literature. To recall (I hope correctly) Prof. De Mauro's comment on the opening day: "Style is important

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I) H.G. Widdowson, Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature, Longman, London, 1975

as a means towards comprehension[1]. Furthermore, to refer back to the discussione after Prof. Garavelli's talk yesterday morning about the use of translation and paraphrase: why study English literature in English if it is not for the language itself? If ~~English literature~~ it is for the themes or ideas, then a translation or a paraphrase is perfectly adequate - better, for weak learners. The only justification for studying English literature in the original, i.e. English, is because we think the language used by the writer is a crucial element in the literary creation.

In the twenty minutes I have limited myself to, I can obviously deal only briefly with one small aspect of literature. I will confine my remarks to prose, in fact the novel, partly because prose is perhaps an easier lead-in, than poetry is, to literary studies for foreign learners who have already spent a few years on language work in school.

Prof. Widdowson in his book states that "the study of literature is an overtly comparative one...by considering examples of literary discourse alongside conventional uses of language to demonstrate the difference in the way the language system is realised for communicative purposes."[2] Here is a famous example of inappropriate language for a particular social context. If you read the following, it is acceptable, i.e. you expect this formal style of language for this academic context:

> "My reasons for talking are, first, that I think it a right thing for every English Language Officer in Italy (like myself) to set the example of talking to his Italian teachers; secondly, that I am convinced it will add very greatly to my career; and thirdly - which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the important gentleman whom I have the honour of calling my employer."

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2) ibidem, pg. 83

However, if I were to use such language for a proposal of marriage, it would be most inappropriate, indeed comic. And this is, of course, precisely why Jane Austen wrote it:

> "My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish; secondly that I am convinced it will add very greatly to my happiness; and thirdly - which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling patroness".[3]

However, I want to concentrate on a comparative analysis between literary texts. One aspect of language work, familiar, alas, to both teachers and learners, is the use of repetition.

I will consider two types: the first type is mere lexical repetition, from the artificial, unauthentic (though perhaps pedagogically justified) repetition of nouns, like "This is a book, a book, a book." "A pen, a pen, a pen etc.", to the more sophisticated and authentic occurrence of words or phrases which are pepeated in texts (e.g. legal documents). Of course, as we all knew even before Halliday and Hasan[4] drummed it into us, we normally do not expect exact repetition, but substitutes like pronouns and synonyms, as a means of maintaining cohesion. The other type of repetition is concerned with our old friend (or enemy) the substitution table, where we expect our learners to make paradigmatic choices in order, for example, to build up a written composition.

Now let us look at some examples to see what effect they may have on the reader, or to put it the other way round, what the purpose or intention of the writer is.

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3) J. Austen, Pride and Prejudice (Everyman's Lib., Dent).

4) M.A.K. Halliday & R. Hasan, Cohesion in English, Longman, London, 1976

Perhaps I should comment on the almost exclusive use of Dickens. Why? Well, first of all, it is a personal preference; I like him. Secondly, he <u>is</u> a good, nay, great English novelist. Thirdly, he has been rejected often for the wrong reasons. In any case, it is important to bear in mind that these examples are <u>only</u> examples, but I would hope it were possible to extrapolate, to treat other writers in a fairly similar linguistic way - as I will do this afternoon in the workshop sessions. Perhaps I ought also to be honest and admit that I've chosen Dickens because of his extreme, therefore clear-cut, use of repetitions; thus making my task easier.

> It did not appear, however, that there was anything remarkably tremendous about this strange Barbara, who having lived a very quiet life, blushed very much and was quite as embarrassed and uncertain what she ought to say or do, as Kit could possibly be. When he had sat for some little time, attentive to the ticking of the sober clock, he ventured to glance curiously at the dresser, and there, among the plates and dishes, were Barbara's little work-box with a sliding lid to shut in the balls of cotton, and Barbara's prayer-book, and Barbara's hymn-book, and Barbara's Bible. Barbara's little looking-glass hung in a good light near the window, and Barbara's bonnet was on a nail behind the door. From all these mute signs and tokens of her presence, he naturally glanced at Barbara herself, who sat as mute as they, shelling peas into a dish; and just when Kit was looking at her eyelashes and wondering—quite in the simplicity of his heart—what colour her eyes might be, it perversely happened that Barbara raised her head a little to look at him, when both pair of eyes were hastily withdrawn, and Kit leant over his plate, and Barbara over her pea-shells, each in extreme confusion at having been detected by the other.
>
> (Dickens : <u>Old Curiosity Shop</u>) (Dent)

Let us consider the word "Barbara". We would normally expect of course "her" everytime, not "Barbara". Why does Dickens do this? (And can't we ask our learners this question?) Note the repetition as a <u>sound</u> (always important for Dickens). "Her" is reserved for the parts of the body (eyes, head, etc.), but the proper noun "Barbara" increases the importance in Kit's feelings of all her possessions. The work-box is no ordinary one, but Barbara's.

Now, compare this with the following passage taken from a recent novel.

> Margot, wife and mother, wakes from sleep refreshed, as befits her virtuous self. She is a little woman, smooth and plump, nicely bosomed, like some pet woodpigeon. Margot's face is round and bland; her brown and curly hair is sensibly short. Margot's sharp straight little nose still peels from August's holiday in the sun. Margot stirs. Margot yawns. Margot's teeth are white, small and even; Margot's tonsils are healthy. Margot remains in good health not so much because of her husband's care but in spite of the lack of it.

(Fay Weldon : Remember Me - Hodder & Stoughton 76)

The frequent repetition of the proper name rather than the pronoun is used for other characters in succeeding pages. Note the repetition also of the simple present tense. The effect is of an impersonal, distant description to create a mocking or satirical tone which pervades the whole book.

> On the day when matters were concluded between Richard and Mr Badger, we were all under engagement to dine at Mr Badger's house. We were to be 'merely a family party,' Mrs Badger's note said; and we found no lady there but Mrs Badger herself. She was surrounded in the drawing-room by various objects, indicative of her painting a little, playing the piano a little, playing the guitar a little, playing the harp a little, singing a little, working a little, reading a little, writing poetry a little, and botanizing a little. She was a lady of about fifty, I should think, youthfully dressed, and of a very fine complexion. If I add, to the little list of her accomplishments, that she rouged a little, I do not mean that there was any harm in it.

(Dickens : Bleak House) (Penguin)

The passage above is also meant to mock, however gently, rather like Jane Austen. How is this linguistically established? By the use of "V + ing + a little.", a rather obvious, even naïve, example; but effective.

> Mr Vholes is a very respectable man. He has not a large business, but he is a very respectable man. He is allowed by the greater attorneys who have made good fortunes, or are making them, to be a most respectable man. He never misses a chance in his practice; which is a mark of respectability. He never takes any pleasure; which is another mark of respectability. He is reserved and serious; which is another mark of respectability. His digestion is impaired, which is highly respectable.

(Dickens : Bleak House) (Penguin)

I have perhaps cheated with this example because the effect of the repetition here of "which is + NP" (with "respectable") depends on reading the preceding paragraph, i.e. he is anything but respectable - rather, he is dirty, seedy, morally detestable. 7

Now let us consider what Dickens does with the audio-lingual standby, the substitution drill. Instead of selecting only one item (a word or a phrase) from the paradigm, Dickens chooses them all - as perhaps sometimes our learners have done. However, Dickens uses this device to create an accumulative, exaggerated effect.

Scrooge! A squeezing,wrenching,grasping,scraping,clutching,covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as a flint,...secret and self-contained as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features,nipped his pointed nose,shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red,his thin lips blue...

(Dickens : A Christmas Carol) (Dent).

So, inthe Scrooge passage he does not simply write "Hard as a flint", but "hardand sharp as a flint". Similarly with the four verbs: froze, nipped, shrivelled, stiffened.

With that hospitable invitation, the Captain said 'Good day!' and walked out and shut the door; leaving Mr Carker still reclining against the chimney-piece. In whose sly look and watchful manner; in whose false mouth, stretched but not laughing; in whose spotless cravat and very whiskers; even in whose silent passing of his soft hand over his white linen and his smooth face; there was something desperately cat-like.

(Dickens : Dombey and Son) (Penguin).

This repeats the relative clause "in whose.....".

This suppositious phenomenon is so very disagreeable to Mr Guppy that his voice quakes, as he says in a moral way, 'Tony, I should have thought that what we went through last night, would have been a lesson to you never to be personal any more as long as you lived.' To which Mr Weevle returns, 'William, I should have thought it would have been a lesson to you never to conspire any more as long as you lived.' To which Mr Guppy says, 'Who's conspiring?' To which Mr Jobling replies, 'Why, you are!' To which Mr Guppy retorts, 'No, I am not.' To which Mr Jobling retorts again, 'Yes, you are!' To which Mr Guppy retorts, 'Who says so?' To which Mr Jobling retorts, 'I say so!' To which Mr Guppy retorts, 'Oh, indeed?' To which Mr Jobling retorts, 'Yes indeed!' And both being now in a heated state, they walk on silently for a while, to cool down again.

((Dickens : Bleak House) (Penguin)

With such an example we increase the scope of linguistic repetition; here for comic effect. The repetition of the linguistic forms reflects the rapid exchange of the argument between these two characters.

These examples so far indicate the use of the repetition of linguistic items. But we would not want our learners merely to identify their existence as a purely mechanical exercise. We must always insist that our learners attempt to answer the question: Why does the writer do this?

He comes to a gateway in the brick wall, looks in, and sees a great perplexity of iron lying about, in every stage, and in a vast variety of shapes; in bars, in wedges, in sheets; in tanks, in boilers, in axles, in wheels, in cogs, in cranks, in rails; twisted and wrenched into eccentric and perverse forms, as separate parts of machinery; mountains of it broken-up, and rusty in its age; distant furnaces of it glowing and bubbling in its youth; bright fireworks of it showering about, under the blows of the steam-hammer; red-hot iron, white-hot iron, cold-black iron; an iron taste, an iron smell, and a Babel of iron sounds.

(Dickens : Bleak House) (Penguin)

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex Marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.

(Dickens : Bleak House) (Penguin)

These are two instances of the motif factor in literature. The first, the iron motif - by repetition of the word itself and by its collocations; in the second, the fog motif.

Now we leave Dickens for other writers: "Animal Farm" is a favourite with many a teacher, if not, learner. Have you noticed how often (by repetition, that is) Orwell uses negative-type words when dealing with Benjamin? (worst, cynical, alone, slow, obstinate, cryptic, refused, badly)

But of course, we can go further along this track to more general themes, still linguistically determined, e.g. the theme of the train journey.

He found no pleasure or relief in the journey. Tortured by these thoughts he carried monotony with him, through the rushing landscape, and hurried headlong, not through a rich and varied country, but a wilderness of blighted plans and gnawing jealousies. The very speed at which the train was whirled along, mocked the swift course of the young life that had been borne away so steadily and so inexorably to its foredoomed end. The power that forced itself upon its iron way – its own – defiant of all paths and roads, piercing through the heart of every obstacle, and dragging living creatures of all classes, ages, and degrees behind it, was a type of the triumphant monster, Death.

Away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, from the town, burrowing among the dwellings of men and making the streets hum, flashing out into the meadows for a moment, mining in through the damp earth, booming on in darkness and heavy air, bursting out again into the sunny day so bright and wide; away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, through the fields, through the woods, through the corn, through the hay, through the chalk, through the mould, through the clay, through the rock, among objects close at hand and almost in the grasp, ever flying from the traveller, and a deceitful distance ever moving slowly within him: like as in the track of the remorseless monster, Death!

Through the hollow, on the height, by the heath, by the orchard, by the park, by the garden, over the canal, across the river, where the sheep are feeding, where the mill is going, where the barge is boating, where the dead are lying, where the factory is smoking, where the stream is running, where the village clusters, where the great cathedral rises, where the bleak moor lies, and the wild breeze smooths or ruffles it at its inconstant will; away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, and no trace to leave behind but dust and vapour: like as in the track of the remorseless monster, Death!

Breasting the wind and light, the shower and sunshine, away, and still away, it rolls and roars, fierce and rapid, smooth and certain, and great works and massive bridges crossing up above, fall like a beam of shadow an inch broad, upon the eye, and then are lost. Away, and still away, onward and onward ever: glimpses of cottage-homes, of houses, mansions, rich estates, of husbandry and handicraft, of people, of old roads and paths that look deserted,

small, and insignificant as they are left behind: and so they do, and what else is there but such glimpses, in the track of the indomitable monster, Death!

Away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, plunging down into the earth again, and working on in such a storm of energy and perseverance, that amidst the darkness and whirlwind the motion seems reversed, and to tend furiously backward, until a ray of light upon the wet wall shows its surface flying past like a fierce stream. Away once more into the day, and through the day, with a shrill yell of exultation, roaring, rattling, tearing on, spurning everything with its dark breath, sometimes pausing for a minute where a crowd of faces are, that in a minute more are not; sometimes lapping water greedily, and before the spout at which it drinks has ceased to drip upon the ground, shrieking, roaring, rattling through the purple distance!

Louder and louder yet, it shrieks and cries as it comes tearing on resistless to the goal: and now its way, still like the way of Death, is strewn with ashes thickly. Everything around is blackened. There are dark pools of water, muddy lanes, and miserable habitations far below. There are jagged walls and falling houses close at hand, and through the battered roofs and broken windows, wretched rooms are seen, where want and fever hide themselves in many wretched shapes, while smoke and crowded gables, and distorted chimneys, and deformity of brick and mortar penning up deformity of mind and body, choke the murky distance. As Mr Dombey looks out of his carriage window, it is never in his thoughts that the monster who has brought him there has let the light of day in on these things: not made or caused them. It was the journey's fitting end, and might have been the end of everything; it was so ruinous and dreary.[1]

So, pursuing the one course of thought, he had the one relentless monster still before him. All things looked black, and cold, and deadly upon him, and he on them. He found a likeness to his misfortune everywhere. There was a remorseless triumph going on about him, and it galled and stung him in his pride and jealousy, whatever form it took: though most of all when it divided with him the love and memory of his lost boy.

There was a face – he had looked upon it, on the previous night, and it on him with eyes that read his soul, though they were dim

Here, just note the linguistic repetitions; enough, surely, here for work with your "superiore" learners.

We shall compare Dickens's treatment of this theme with Stevenson's this afternoon in the workshop.[5]

This, in its turn, can lead on to broader themes, like the cliché school or childhood-learning theme treated by different authors, e.g.:

Churchill : "The first day at Harrow school" in AA.VV, English and American Literature: an anthology, S.E.I., Torino, 1972, pg.23

Butler : The Way of All Flesh (Everyman's Library, Dent).

Dickens : Nicholas Nickleby and Hard Times (" ").

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5) Vedi pg. XXX

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Joyce : Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man (Cape 1968).
Muriel Spark: The Prime of Miss Brodie (MacMillan, 1961).
A. Powell : The Music of Time (Heinemann).
A; Sillitoe: The Long Distance Runner. (Longman, 1966).

But, please note. I am advocating a linguistic or stylistic study within such a general ~~theme~~ i.e. how does Powell's writing differ from and also share the language of, say, Joyce in their literary expression of school life?

To repeat what I said at the beginning: If you say to me you are only concerned with the theme itself, not the language used; then I say to you: Don't bother using English, use an Italian translation.

A final word: without having any ambitions to produce a Shakespeare or a Dickens from among our learners, we could perhaps - as a writing follow/up to such reading activity - say to our learners: "Now you've seen how this writer has expressed X, how about you having a go? - either deliberately copying the style of the studied writer or deliberately avoiding it".

John Greenwood
1/12/80.